THE CHURCH AND POVERTY
Matthew 11:1-6
June 23, 1968
John M. Buchanan

If you are like some people I know, in fact several I've encountered this week, some of you are already uncomfortable, perhaps even angry, having read the title of the sermon this morning. Presbyterians are walking out of their churches with increasing frequency these days as their ministers address themselves to the topic of poverty - a rather pathetic ritual that may be a tragic loss to the church, or, on the other hand, a healthy pruning of the vine by the Holy Spirit himself. In any case, I have no illusions this morning; I anticipate that some of you are already disagreeing with me before I've spoken a word. And I ask only that you give me the next twenty minutes or so, before you beat a hasty exit.

I am provoked this morning by two situations in which I found myself most week - both far and safely removed from the life of this congregation. In the first I was part of a church meeting at which the subject of the "Poor People's Campaign" was introduced by way of an appeal for support. The reaction was immediate and strong and completely negative. What impressed me most was the unanimity with which these people displayed rather unpleasant hostility and complete antipathy, not only to the sometimes bizarre antics of Resurrection City, but to the stated aims and goals of the entire effort. No one had an intelligent or informed thing to say, and the discussion never rose above a dismal airing of mutual ignorance, dragging out all the old cliches - "We made it - why can't they!"

Later in the week I attended a funeral during which the minister, within the context of his meditation, felt constrained to lash out at the Presbyterian Church for its concern with race, poverty and peace. In that the funeral was for my grandfather, and in that I had the uncomfortable suspicion that the remarks were being addressed directly to me - I became truly angry. For a while, the man had a point, albeit an irrelevant one at a funeral. The Gospel is more than social concern. Amen. I buy that. But the extremism he displayed in assuming the opposite position was equally as erroneous as that which would close the church altogether, transforming it into the field headquarters for the War on Poverty.

It's a divisive, inflammatory issue and the real problem seems to be this: the United Presbyterian Church, as a denomination, has made substantial financial and personal commitments, in a sense pulling out all the stops to attack the problem of poverty. But the laity, according to a recent Gallup poll, not only couldn't care less, but are opposed to the actions of their church in this matter. Another way of putting it is this: the denomination is frantically trying to do battle with an enemy most of its constituents don't acknowledge exists: or if they do grant that poverty is a problem, certainly don't feel any personal responsibility for its alleviation.

Now it is out of this context that I speak this morning: certainly not expecting you to buy everything I say, wanting only to put before you three rather simple ideas - hoping that you will remain "tuned in" until I have concluded.

The first idea is this: Poverty is rapidly becoming the greatest single problem confronting the United States of America. There are other serious concerns, to be sure: - the war in Vietnam, unrest in the cities, an overheated economy, a continuing deficit in the balance of payments. But one and all, they are related to the problem of domestic poverty.

Poverty is not new to the United States: there have always been poor people. But poverty is, and always has been, a relative term, and in this respect the complexion of the problem has changed drastically over the past two decades. We have become, in the short span of twenty years, a phenomenally affluent culture. I think you and I are inclined to forget that: or perhaps it's not possible to perceive something like this as we are involved in it. In any case, we are a very rich

people. The problem is that nothing has happened to the poor: they are still that way; for one reason or another, they have not shared in the dramatic increase in the average American's ability to buy, borrow, and pay. The problem of poverty has changed in the rapid and steady widening of the gap that divides the "haves" for the "have-nots".

At the same time, those who are poor have become steadily more invisible to the average American. This was documented by Michael Harrington in his excellent book, The Other America: "America has the best dressed poor the world has ever known..... It's much easier in the U. S. to be decently dressed than it is to be decently housed, fed or doctored. Even people with terribly depressed incomes can look prosperous." p. 12-13

Harrington points out that both urban and rural poverty have been removed from the beaten path of most Americans by four lane highways whisking through the countryside, and expressways zooming over city ghettoes. I can cite a personal example: I've lived in Lafayette for nearly two years and have the occasion to do a lot of driving in the city. And the worst housing in the city - unbelievably wretched housing, did not become apparent to me until someone told me where it was and I went to take a look.

These are the two major changes in the complexion of American poverty - relatively speaking, it's gotten worse while becoming less visible. Thus the very real tendency of many Americans not to believe that it exists, or that those who describe it are exaggerating.

Now - what is poverty? What's it like? One thing is certain: it is something more than the lack of money. If you're interested you will read the material available, starting with Michael Harrington's book. For me, poverty was defined in Gary, Indiana. I had the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors of the Gary Neighborhood House, and part of my orientation was a tour of the immediate area. The director took me into several homes, one of which I shall never forget as long as I live. It was an apartment on the sixth floor of a building which, from the outside, didn't look too bad. But the stairs were dark, chunks of plaster made the walking precarious and the halls were cluttered with garbage. We knocked on the door of the apartment in question and after quite a struggle were admitted. I was told that the lock didn't work and that the door had to be opened with a butcher knife. The apartment contained a woman and six young children from one to ten years old. There was a man in the bedroom. An electric heater in one corner provided a little heat, but also a fire hazard, made more urgent by the fact that the door didn't work. It was a week day morning. The children, clad only in undershirts were at home, and when I inquired why they weren't in school, I was told that they didn't have warm clothes and so the mother just didn't send them when it was cold outside. Nobody seemed to care.

Now, think for a minute - not about the morality of adults or why she doesn't do something. Think a minute about those six children as teenagers, or adults, if they live that long. Suddenly the American dream loses its glow, and all our self righteous cliches about working hard fall to pieces. These children don't have a chance.

That's poverty, and it is far more than the lack of money, or education, or a any other single factor. And it's significant that programs, thus far devised, aren't beginning to touch it. It's not getting any better, anywhere; and until it does, it will result in more and even worse poverty.

Presiding Bishop Hines of the Episcopal Church has said: "I am not concerned alone with the problems of poor Americans. What is at stake is the very life of our society, the rebuilding of our communities as centers in which persons and families are fulfilled - not crippled."

That is the issue - poverty is the greatest single problem confronting the United States. It is one war we cannot conceivably afford to lose.

The second idea I would lay before you is that poverty is the concern of the Church of Jesus Christ. And although I have three different ideas to buttress that suggestion, I don't really need anything more than the Responsive Reading this morning. That said it rather well.

I took the time this week to trace the word "poor" through the Bible and finally gave up. There were enough references to fill a sizeable volumn. In the Old Testament, there are basically four different types of references to poverty. First, God is the friend and protector of the poor. Second, there is a strong motif of social justice for the poor. Try reading the book of Amos sometime. It's rather disturbing. Third, there are many warnings against oppressing the poor - such as the entire book of Micah. Finally, there are specific laws regarding the care of the poor.

In the New Testament, Jesus displayed on many occasions His special concern for the dispossessed. In the lesson this morning one of the things by which he described his own ministry was preaching good news to the poor. And what, I have always wanted to ask, is good news to a poor man, if it is not that he no longer has to be bound to poverty?

The Bible, however, is no utopian document at this point. It cites the causes of poverty as sloth and laziness as well as famine and plague. But that doesn't matter. In the Bible responsibility for poverty, whatever its causes, is laid directly on those who are not poor. Just like that.

It would be grossly unfair to indict the church for ignoring poverty in the past. Because it hasn't. Throughout the world the greatest generator of compassion and help has always been the church of Jesus Christ. And yet, too frequently, particularly on a local level, the church's methodology in dealing with poverty has been charity - stop-gap measures that don't come close to root causes or permanent alleviation. The symbol of our concern for the poor has always been the Christmas basket, which by our own admission makes us feel rather good. That is it salves our guilt, and leaves the recipient as hungry the day after Christmas as he was the day before.

The Church's responsibility in dealingwith poverty has been described by someone in terms of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story, you will remember, a Samaritan helps a Jew who was beaten and robbed by bandits. Well, suppose it happened a second time and a third and a fourth, and suppose the Samaritan found the victim and ministered to him each time in the same manner. At some point the Samaritan, even with his great charitable spirit would be remiss if he didn't go to the authorities and try to have something done about keeping the road clear of bandits.

Biblically, we are responsible. There are no two ways about it. But the concern of the church goes even deeper. God loves the world. God loves the world and every individual person in the world, and wills for every person a full and abundant and good life. That's rather elementary theology, and it means that God is hurt when a child starves, or when a child is mentally impaired for the rest of his life because his diet is not sufficient as an infant.

God loves the world, and so he sent his son to show that love, and to call to him other men who would become the agents of that love. The church's concern for poverty, then, is not political, not economic, not social - it is theological. It is tied directly to the foundational statement of its faith - "God so loved the world."

The third idea I would put before you is this: that poverty is not going to go away: it's not going to be eliminated by all the governmental programs in the world - although that's going to help. The crisis of poverty in our nation will begin to be resolved when a lot of indiviual men and women like you and me undergo a radical change of heart. That, by the way, is not my idea, nor the idea of any

professional churchman. Rather it comes from an editorial written by Louis Cassels of the United Press International.

We haven't had that change of heart, partially - I believe - because we've never really seen the full dimensions of the problem - the utter degradation of hard core poverty, or the threat it presents to the fiber of our nation. Partially it is a problem of provincialism: in comfortable, middle-class Lafayette we just don't have much poverty, and that which we do have we don't ever see. But partially, I believe, it's also a problem of sin. It's just easier not to worry about it; to become so completely immersed in our own private pursuits that another man's difficulties become most unpleasant even to think about: to become so completely obsessed with our own pursuit of the good life that we are offended whenever someone suggests that we might help the man who doesn't even have his foot on the ladder.

The Old Testament tells it like it is - calling it "hardness of heart"; the New Testament calls it sin, and that, I believe, is the real problem.

Three very simple ideas, and my appeal, having presented them to you, is precisely for that radical change of heart. I appeal for a creative, redemptive change - that just might have political and economic ramifications. But for one reason and one reason alone. Because as confessing Christians, as disciples of Jesus Christ we have been told and know our responsibility.

I would conclude by reading to you two portions of the New Testament: from the First Epistle of John: "If anyone has the world's goods,and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love dwell in him?" And from the Gospel according to Matthew: Matt. 25:31-40:

"When the Son of Man comes in Glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food: I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'

"The righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.'

Amen

O thou who art the guardian and protector of the weak and helpless, grant unto us a renewed commitment to the "least of these". Save us from easy solutions, from quick cliches that mean nothing, and instill within us new understanding, new responsibility, new courage as we attempt to be thy people in the world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.